

DAILY COMMERCIAL

LOCAL

'We're concerned about the animals': Pristine land on Lake Griffin could be developed

Frank Stanfield For the Daily Commercial | USA TODAY NETWORK

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FRUITLAND PARK — Art Ayris and his wife, Kelly, routinely find black bears scampering across their yard on Bay Forest Lane, and that's OK with them.

What's not OK is that a nearby lush, pristine 500-acre plot on Lake Griffin may one day become home to some of the humans pouring into the state every day instead of bears.

“We just think that's not equitable,” Ayris said. “We're concerned about the animals.”

The real estate company handling the property, Maury L. Carter & Associates, describes Lake Griffin Farms on its website as “a 516-plus-acre oasis,” noting it is just an hour from Orlando, “the nation's fastest growing metro area,” and The Villages, just five miles-plus away.

The owner, Lake Griffin Farm LLC, has not placed a price tag on the property, said Daryl Carter, president.

The limited liability company, with an address in Okahumpka, purchased the property for \$2,250,000 in May 2019, according to county property records. The registered agent for the company has not returned phone calls from the Daily Commercial.

Grizzard Real Estate listed the sale price of \$12 million when the Matthews family first put it up for sale.

Diana Matthews of Gainesville said the reason for the markdown is that “it would have cost a significant amount of money for any commercial entity to develop the property. In addition, the city of Fruitland Park did not approve development plans [the property is actually in unincorporated Lake County, but the city would have had to approve utilities to the site and it would also have to meet state approval]. Some people might view the property selling for so

much less than the original listing as unfortunate, but we view it as fortunate because it has preserved the property.”

A flier produced by Grizzard described the property this way: “Step back in time. Over 500 acres and almost 1 ¼ mile of lakefront. Moss-laden oak trees hang right over the sandy Lake Griffin shoreline. This pristine property has been in the same family for 150 years and is a rare, beautiful example of Florida.”

The advertisement talked about how “kids and dogs can run for miles! Perfect for a family compound or waterfront community.”

Matthews said about half of the property is wetlands.

“It is our opinion that the Florida water management district should have bought this property to preserve the wetlands and the inland waterway, since Lake Griffin is part of the waterway extending from Lake Apopka to the Atlantic Ocean, via the St. Johns River,” Matthews said.

The family submitted a land acquisition application to the St. Johns River Water Management District in 2017, offering to sell the property to the district for \$4.4 million. Later, in 2018, the Matthews family amended their offer to \$3.7 million, said district spokeswoman Ashley Evitt.

“In 2017 and 2018, district staff performed an evaluation of the parcel and determined it was not located in a priority area We forwarded the information to the Lake County Water Authority which owns the adjoining property for their consideration,” she wrote in an email to the Daily Commercial.

“The district selects land for purchase based on the potential for preserving, restoring, enhancing, or developing water resources within our 18-county region. District staff evaluate each property and prioritize lands providing water resources protection such as floodplains, sensitive wetlands, and groundwater recharge areas.

"Anyone who has a property they would like the district to consider purchasing can submit an application and email it to our Real Estate Services Program. The Land Acquisition Application is available for review at www.sjrwmd.com/lands/acquisition.”

The Lake County Water Authority

It is unclear if the property is on the Lake County Water Authority's wish list.

Established in 1953, the Lake Water Authority says on its website that it has acquired over 6,300 acres for protection since 1989, either through purchase or donation. "About 71 percent is wetlands, the rest are uplands support recreational opportunities."

In 2018, a developer unveiled plans for a 668-acre RV park on the property and adjoining land on the east and west side of Lake Unity Nursery Road and south of Eagles Nest Road.

"The resort planning THOUSANDS of RV campsites bring TOO MUCH TRAFFIC [his emphasis] to our residential roads!" one man wrote in a Facebook post.

Steve Lambert gave a presentation about the proposed Crappie (named for the fish and pronounced "croppie") Eco Ranch Campground and Marina to residents at Calvary Baptist Church and didn't get much love there either.

After talking with Lambert, Art and Kelly Ayris decided that if the land had to be developed the impact wouldn't be too bad. That was then, however.

"The project did not move forward," said county spokeswoman Sarah Lux.

Family members didn't really want to sell the land, said Diana Matthews.

"If owners are unable to maintain the agricultural exemption, they cannot afford the taxes. Ethel Matthews ordered in her trust that the land be sold because it is unlikely that her sons could have maintained the agricultural exemption...." Matthews wrote.

She also noted that the family would have been hit with inheritance taxes if the property had not been placed into a trust.

"... this taxation of Florida pioneers and their homesteads from the 19th century is a major reason for the sale of these properties. Sometimes, late at night, a person could wonder if it is all part of overdeveloping Florida," she said.

Art Ayris, standing on the banks of the 9,327-acre lake and looking across a canal at the property, would agree.

"This is Florida," he said, looking at the birds, trees, and a sign warning would-be fishermen to beware of "aggressive alligators."